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## Lusting for old Shanghai: Andrew Field and Tess Johnston @ SILF 2010

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By Marta Cooper

Shanghai is a city where one has to work particularly hard to find simple, unadulterated culture. So, when the blue moon opportunity comes to bask in it for two weeks, I do just that. Most recently, that's meant heading to the sophisticated Glamour Bar, overlooking the curve of the Bund and the sci-fi lights of Pudong, which has been hosting the [2010 Shanghai International Literary Festival \(SILF\)](#) this month. The venue has been brimming with excitement, with authors from County Cork to Manila sharing their work with the spoiled audience.

On a mild Saturday, hot off the heels of [Paul French's](#) swim through the depths of decadent and dirty Shanghai, two more authors took us back in time.

In the morning, historian [Andrew Field](#) launched his new book, *[Shanghai's Dancing World: Cabaret Culture and Urban Politics, 1919-1954](#)*. Plunging into an untapped reservoir of Chinese sources, government documents, novels and magazines, Field described a time when cabaret and ballroom dancehalls decorated old Shanghai.

Thanks to the pockets of Westerners in Shanghai's concessionary areas, the city had its own edition of the Roaring Twenties. Shanghai's dancehalls were awash with American musicians blending jazz beats and riffs with Chinese folk, taxi dancers being paid to drink, dance and converse with men, and local girls from a variety of class backgrounds cruising the town in 3-inch heels. It even seemed from his presentation that the glamorous and decadent cabaret halls, adorned in nickel, crystal and marble with electric lights, sometimes echoed more *Saturday Night Fever* than Paris of the Orient.

Dancing the cha-cha and Charleston were not only Shanghai's answer to flappers, but also the city's gangsters, who often used the venues for their own rackets. The scandalous underworld of sexual dancing and criminal culture unsettled the then-ruling KMT (Nationalist Party), which banned cabarets in 1927 but failed to outlaw the dancing halls and ballrooms that were conveniently situated in the concessionary areas, and therefore under foreign control.

What Field reminded us of is that the local Shanghainese quickly jumped on to the cabaret bandwagon and eventually "elbowed the foreigners off the dancefloor." Despite the fact that the dancing was controversial in terms of Confucian cultural values, these venues sprung up during an enlightened era in which the May 4th Movement had set the stage for a context of change. What was initially a puzzling development for the locals was soon appropriated as a liberating transgression (however, when asked what the Chinese thought of this ballroom culture, Field simply responded: "read the book!").

Field wrapped up by drawing parallels between the then and now. Even without the 1920s' glamour, Shanghai's nightlife is still one of the city's greatest assets: the club scene is alive and well, and bars of both the sophisticated and seedy varieties are not difficult to come by. For Field, the past still echoes through the amplifiers.

In the afternoon, 80-year-old (or, going on 25) [Tess Johnston](#) took us on a more personal journey. Having spent forty plus years abroad in the US Foreign Service, Johnston descended on Shanghai in the early 1980s. She called the city she found a combination of 1938 Warsaw and Calcutta: "grubby, grey and crumbling...but all entirely intact," she said. She heralded the Bund, her most cherished Shanghai sight, as "a scruffy showcase of Western architecture, but wonderful."



For the next hour, Johnston regaled us with tales of the mystique of the French Concession, foreigners-only markets in old warehouses, not wasting one bite of a decadent Snickers bar that had already been half-eaten by rats, and struggling to find an available dish on the Western menu at the Park Hotel. In between her escapades, Johnston managed to write 25 books, including several on Western architecture and the life of an expat in old China.

Johnston's words were infused with nostalgia, but not for the glamorous Paris of the East that Field had described. Instead, Johnson yearned for simpler times: "there was no glitz or lust for money," she said of 1980s Shanghai.

The city's superficial reality certainly overshadows its creative and immaterial vibes. For a jazz enthusiast spoiled by London's delicious culture, I arrived here with an immature pang for the Paris of the Orient I never experienced.

However, it is useless to criticise the materialistic currents running through the city's nouveau riche. As Johnston affirmed, "who could begrudge China these new opportunities? The Shanghainese are taking this city into the twenty-first century with a vengeance."

*Marta Cooper is a British-Italian writer and student based in Shanghai. She currently writes for [Shanghaiist](#) and [Global Voices Online](#), and keeps a blog titled...in Shanghai.*

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